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ABSTRACT

When a college conducts an accreditation self-study, it is best to begin by addressing basic philosophical questions about the college's mission and goals. American River College in Sacramento, California, began its process by responding to the following questions: (1) Can we be all things to all people? (2) Does open door mean open curriculum? (3) Should assessment be provided and for whom? (4) How much remediation should be offered and should there be a minimum student ability required? (5) What does "comprehensive" mean in terms of curriculum? (6) What student support services should be provided? (7) Do we define our programs and services in relation to our community? (8) What is the institution's responsibility to the student and the student's responsibility to the institution? and (9) By what criteria do we measure institution and student accountability? Using the charrette process (a technique which pools the talents of different people to study and develop a plan), consensus statements were developed by the faculty, administration, classified staff, student body, and board of trustees for each set of questions. These statements now form the basis for the ongoing planning process. (DC)

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A PROCESS FOR REASSESSING INSTITUTIONAL DIRECTION

by Sharon Ruckle

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A PROCESS FOR REASSESSING INSTITUTIONAL DIRECTION

Colleges traditionally review their statements of philosophy, mission, and goals when they begin their accreditation self-studies. Often this is done in a perfunctory manner by a small committee who makes some slight revision in the wording or adds a few new buzz words. Provided that an effective process guides the review, however, reassessing these statements provides the institution with an opportunity to reappraise its purpose and direction, particularly in a time of dwindling resources when substantive changes in education are being proposed from within and without.

When a college takes a serious look at itself, which is the purpose of the accreditation process, it may be useful to start from scratch--that is, to address some basic philosophical questions first and then, after reaching consensus on answers to these questions, use the answers to form the basis for new statements of philosophy, mission, and goals.

American River College in Sacramento began its accreditation self-study by addressing the following questions, developed by President Robert Jensen through a creative technique called a *charrette*. The questions that formed the heart of this first step in reassessment would be appropriate for other community colleges:

1. Can we be all things to all people? When resources are limited, a college must decide whether to provide a small amount of everything for everyone, or to set priorities in terms of what educational services are to be provided. If a college wants to provide all the services, then it will have to decide to what degree. If it wishes to limit services, then it must develop a process to determine which are more important than others.
2. Does open door mean open curriculum? Does the open door philosophy mean that any person who comes to the college can take any class? Should program entry be first-come, first-served, or should there be threshold requirements for entry? If there are more students who meet the minimum criteria for entry than there are available slots, how do you determine who enrolls?
3. Should assessment be provided and for whom? Should the institution provide assessment? Who should be assessed--the student coming back to take one or two courses in the evening, the student who already has a bachelor's degree--or all students no matter what their backgrounds or goals? Do we assess only basic skills or do we go beyond? Should assessment be used in conjunction with minimum competencies for course or program enrollment? If significant numbers of students do not meet minimum competency levels and cannot enroll in programs or courses, what are the consequences for staffing?
4. How much remediation should be offered? Should there be a minimum threshold of student ability required? Does the open door imply that remediation should be provided all students, no matter what their competency levels? If not, how are minimum standards set? What options are offered to students who do not meet them? What impact will enforcing minimum standards have on course enrollment and staffing?
5. What does "comprehensive" mean in terms of curriculum? What breadth and depth of offerings are necessary to be comprehensive? Can small colleges with only forty full-time faculty be truly comprehensive? Often colleges offer a proliferation of specialized courses because the faculty want more diversity--is this philosophically sound or should the college concentrate on lower-division courses that serve as introductions to the basic disciplines?

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6. What student support services should the college provide? As colleges reassess their consumers' needs in times of tight dollars, what support services are necessary for student success in the college environment?

7. Do we define our programs and services in relation to our community? In a time of great mobility, does the community college need to look at needs beyond its own community . . . at area, regional, statewide, or nationa' needs? Should the curriculum reflect community needs? If so, how should the college involve the community in the process? Should the college offer the courses and programs the community prefers, or should the college develop what it considers to be a balanced curriculum and leave some community and student needs unmet (for example, offer electronics or foreign language?).

8. What is the institution's responsibility to the student? What is the student's responsibility to the institution? In an era of newly defined consumer rights, what is the institution's responsibility in terms of assisting students in setting and achieving educational goals? Students now have more precisely defined rights; but what responsibilities do the students then have to the institution--not just in terms of behavior but in terms of academic performance?

9. By what criteria do we measure institution and student accountability? Student outcomes have traditionally been measured in terms of A.A. degrees awarded, number and performance of transfer students, job placement, and the like. For the mobile college student, who drops in and drops out, are there more reliable measures that can be applied to evaluate the institution's performance?

As a method for answering the above questions, American River College used the charrette process. The term "charrette" (shar-ret), from the French word for 'cart,' is used in architecture to mean an intensive critique and planning session. At the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, student architects collected their project materials to be juried by the faculty and pulled them in a cart to the examination place, making final corrections as they went. The other architectural students who pulled and pushed the charrette would critique and redesign the architectural plans and solutions their colleagues were about to present. This intensive process resulted in projects superior to those that lacked such group scrutiny.

In time, the charrette process has come to be used by professional architects who call others in to help critique a plan for its effectiveness in solving the problem at hand. The charette brings a number of talents, interests, biases, and resources to bear at one time on an important problem. It is a planning mechanism that allows a large pool of varied talents to study and develop simultaneously a plan to yield a positive result--and to do it in a very short time.

Through the charrette process at American River College, over 150 members of the faculty, administration, classified staff, student body, and board of trustees participated in seventeen hours of discussion and consensus seeking. Consensus statements developed for each set of questions were used to form a new statement of philosophy, mission, and goals. Those who participated in the charrette expressed excitement and agreed that it was both healthy and productive to bring together the various segments of the college to discuss and come to agreement on significant institutional issues. The new statements now form the basis for the ongoing college planning process, and activities to implement the charrette outcomes have already begun.

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